

SUSTAINING GRACE

Several years ago engineers were building a new bridge over the East River in New York. They discovered that the wrecked hull of a sunken metal ship lay right where the center piers were to be built. Powerful cranes were brought in to try and pull the ship up from the bottom but it would not budge. Then one of the engineers had an idea. Strong cables were attached to the hull of the sunken ship. At low tide, a barge was brought in and the cables were fastened to it. As the tide came in, the barge gradually lifted the sunken ship. It was then towed out into the ocean and sunk at a spot that would not cause future problems.

There are times in our lives when we are like those cranes trying to pull a wreck from the bottom. We just do not have enough strength to do it. It is then when we have to hold tight to Jesus and allow His quiet gentle strength to lift us and to carry us. Only in Jesus do we have the strength we need.

Today we are continuing in our series Amazing Grace. Last week we talked about saving grace. That means God's gift of salvation that we receive by faith in Jesus. Today I want to talk about sustaining grace. This is the help we need to live in this world in which we live. Jesus said in John 10:10 that He came to give us life and have it to the full. Not just eternal life, but life now.

1 Peter 5:10-11 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

1. Keeps me Grounded when I am Tempted

The moment you accepted the grace and gift of God you passed from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. You went from being property of the devil to being a child of God. The devil hates you because of that. He wants to do everything in his power to destroy you.

1 Peter 5:8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

The devil is looking to destroy you. So how do we stand against him? It starts with being self-controlled and alert. In the Greek it says that we need to be sober and awake. Being sober means that we are in control, that there is nothing else in our lives controlling us. To be awake means to be watchful, that we are alert and ready to act when danger comes.

Every day we are faced with a variety of moral choices. We have the ability to choose between wrong and right. These moral choices are called temptations. Everybody is tempted. You will never outgrow temptation. The Bible says even Jesus was tempted. It says He was tempted in all points like we are but he never sinned. The good news is this: If Jesus was tempted and He never sinned it means it's not a sin to be tempted. It's a sin to give in to temptation.

Sometimes you may think "How could I even think of such a thing." Just because you thought something does not mean you are a bad person. You cannot control all the thoughts that go through your mind. But you can control which thoughts to and you chose to dwell on. You can't stop the birds from going over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.

Take one area of temptation -- sexual temptation. God made us men and women with attraction for one another. Feelings of attraction are not wrong, unless you use them in a wrong way or apply them to a wrong person. Many people misunderstand and confuse attraction with lust. They're not the same thing.

If you are a man and you are walking down the road and see an attractive woman, it is not a sin to be attracted. I had a friend in Seminary who, if he saw an attractive girl would say "Thank you Jesus." Now sometimes he said it with far too much enthusiasm, but you understand my point. It is not a sin to be attracted to someone. That is not lust. The issue is what do you do with that attraction.

Lust is when you begin to dwell on the attraction. It is when you begin to entertain thoughts that are sinful. Instead of being the one in control and taking the thought captive, you let it just run around unchecked. Instead of being alert and watchful you just put on the mental cruise control and let the thought take over. It is not a sin to be tempted. It's a sin to give in to temptation.

Years ago Larry King interviewed Billy Graham. They were talking about different scandals. Finally Larry King said to him, "You're 80 years old and you've been in the public limelight your entire life and you've never had a scandal. You have a history of integrity. How have you managed to never have a scandal in your life?" Billy Graham quoted 1 Corinthians 10:13

1 Corinthians 10:13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

This is a wonderful promise. God will never allow more temptation on you than can handle. That is sustaining grace. There is always an escape route. There is always a way out.

This verse also says that temptation is COMMON. That means that everyone goes through the same thing. That is good news, because it means that, whatever you are going through, there is someone else that has been through it as well.

You do not have to go through temptation alone. In fact, the greatest way to handle temptation is to have an accountability partner. Someone you can share your struggles with. The devil loves to come against us in the darkness. Talking about your struggles with another person brings those struggles into the light and exposes them and disarms them.

2. Keeps me Going when I am Tired

Sometimes the issue is not temptation. It is just that you are tired. Life can be exhausting. It requires a lot of strength, a lot of energy to live life especially when you are going against the flow. It is much harder paddling a canoe downstream than upstream.

1 Corinthians 16:13 Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong.

We are told to be alert and watchful. To be on our guard. To stand firm and be courageous and strong. These are all words that require effort. When all the culture is going one way and you're trying to do the right thing, it's tough. It's tough being the only person in the office when someone starts some dirty jokes and you don't want to be a part. The more you try to do what's right, the more energy you must exert.

Galatians 6:9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Paul tells us not to grow weary in doing good, because that is what HAPPENS. It hard to go against the flow. It is hard to live for Christ in a world controlled by the devil. Sometimes I get grouchy. Sometimes I want to be rude back to people who are rude with me. So how do we find the energy to live for Jesus in this fallen world?

Philippians 2:13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

I once heard a person say "It is hard to be a Christian today!" It is not hard, it is impossible. In and of ourselves, none of us has the strength. The only perfect person who ever lived was Jesus Christ. If we are going to live a victorious Christian life we have to understand that we cannot do it in our own strength but that we need to rely of God's power in us. The key to the Christian life is not trying, it's trusting.

Do you know how many years it took Noah to build the ark? The Bible says 120 years. Can you imagine waiting 120 years for anything? In those days they lived a whole lot longer. But the point is, Noah waited 120 years. How did he have the ability to keep on keeping on when he was tired? Surely he must have gotten tired building the ark.

Genesis 6:8 But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

The word for favour in Hebrew is GRACE. Noah understood God's sustaining grace. Like Noah, God wants to give you His power to do what you need to do. The Christian life is not a matter of willpower but a matter of God power. God never asks you to do anything He has not first given you the power to do. Think for a moment about the greatness of God's power.

God made the sun. The sun produces more power in one single second than all the human race has used throughout all of history. The sun has enough energy to burn for thirty billion more years. Yet God made the sun. He simply spoke it and the rest of the universe into existence. That's the kind of power He has.

How many stars are in just our universe? According to researchers there 70 sextillion – that means a 7 followed by 22 zeros. That is a lot of stars.

Psalms 147:3-5 He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. 4 He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. 5 Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.

How many grains of sand are there in the world? Some estimated that there are about seven quintillion – that means a 7 with 18 zeros behind it. That is also a big number, yet scriptures remind us

Psalms 139:16-18 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.

How many gallons of water are in the oceans? Again, someone has calculated that there are about 3.6 sextillion gallons. That is 3.6 followed by 21 zeros. A huge number, yet ...

Psalms 33:6-7 By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. 7 He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses.

God has infinite power. Then He comes to you and says, "You need some power? I'll give you the will and the power to handle it." Because God's power is unlimited, He never gets tired. When it says about creation that on the seventh day, God rested, it wasn't because He was tired; it was because He was finished. He had finished with creation.

God's grace is a sustaining grace. Not just when I'm tempted and not just when I'm tired ...

3. Keeps me Growing when I am Troubled

There are going to be times in life when we face obstacles that seem unsurmountable. We will face many problems, trials and adversities. Jesus promised us that "In the world you will have trouble." He said expect it, don't be surprised by it.

There are problems that hit us like a sack of potatoes with such force that they knock us down. It is like the rug is pulled out from under us and we fall hard.

There are other problems that are like a train wreck in slow motion. We see them coming and they are relentless and ongoing.

Perhaps the most difficult to handle are the unfair ones. You are just an innocent party and someone hurts you and wrongs you. You don't deserved it and have no control over it and are left asking yourself and God why did it have to happen.

They're especially hard to handle when they're not only undeserved but they are unrelenting. Most of us can handle problems if we can see an end in sight, light at the end of the tunnel. If I can see the problem is going to be over in six months, eight months -- I can handle anything for that length of time or year or whatever. But there are some things in your life that are going to continue to be a burden. Things that you will live with the rest of your life. There are some situations in life that are just part of our world, and all the wishing and praying is not going to make them go away.

God know that we are weak. Jesus understands what it is to go through trials. He gives us the strength we need for each new day.

Isaiah 41:13-14 For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. 14 Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you," declares the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

C. H. Spurgeon told the story that a large sum of money was given to a man named Rowland Hill to dispense to a poor pastor. Thinking that the amount was too much to send all at once, Hill forwarded just a portion along with a note that said simply, 'More to follow.' In a few days the man received another envelope containing the same amount and with the same message, 'More to follow.' At regular intervals, there came a third, and a fourth. In fact, they continued, along with those cheering words, until the entire sum had been received.

The grace of God helps us each day. He gives us what we need for that day with the promise 'More to follow.' And then the next day, and then the next. Each day we have, like the manna in the desert, enough grace to sustain us.

So how do we lay hold of and learn to rely on God's sustaining grace?

a. Call Out

Cry out to God for help. As long as you pretend to be self sufficient you short circuit God's power in your life. You need to admit your inadequacy and say, "God, I can't handle this!" and you cry out for God's help.

James 4:6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Circle "humble." Who gets grace? The humble. Those who admit they can't do it on their own. You draw near to God and you cry out to God.

The Lord has more need of our weakness than of our strength: our strength is often His rival; our weakness, His servant, drawing on His resources, and showing forth His glory. Man's extremity is God's opportunity; man's security is Satan's opportunity. God's way is not to take His children out of trial, but to give them strength to bear up against it —Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary

b. Comfort Yourself

The bible is a source on ongoing strength for us. We need to be students of God's word. Read it every day. Memorize it. Make sure you have a modern translation that you can understand.

Psalms 119:12-16 Praise be to you, O LORD; teach me your decrees. 13 With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. 14 I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. 15 I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. 16 I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.... 28 My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.

Our word tells us to look within when we have trials. That is not what I am saying. People need to stop listening to the gospel according to Star Wars. Remember the first film, Obi-Wan Kenobi says to young Luke Skywalker when he's going through his crisis, "The answers are within you, Luke. Look inside yourself."

That is just not true. The answers are not within us until we place them there from God's word. When we get in trouble we need to look to God for strength, not ourselves. Call out for God's help. Fill your mind with God's word.

There are thousands of promises that God has given us through His word. Lay hold of them. Use them. When you're going through a problem you can't fix, don't give up, look up!

c. Call on Others

As a church we believe in the importance of small groups. As I said a few weeks ago when I spoke about the movie It's A Wonderful Life, when George Bailey got in trouble it was his friends that came

to his rescue. One of the primary ways that God sustains us through trials is through the church. It is through the ministry of others.

If you don't have some strong Christian friends, mature believers, and you're not in some small group where you can have some feedback and support when the crisis is on, I feel pity for you. You need a support group. God never meant for you to go through life on your own. You need to accept support from God's people.

I am reminded of Archimedes, the ancient Greek scientist who discovered the value of leverage. As he was enamored with his fulcrum, he was said to have proclaimed, "Give me a long enough lever and a place to stand and I'll move the whole world." It is not the size of the lever that saves us but the size of our God.

When we went to Egypt, Joshua and I had a chance to visit the pyramids. We went around on horseback, which sounds a lot more fun than it actually was. At one point our tour guide had us pose for some pictures. Here is a picture of Joshua holding up a huge boulder. You see just how large this rock was.

It is not nearly as impressive when you see the next picture and you notice the thumb of the guy taking the picture. The power holding up the stone is not the hands of Joshua from below, it is the hand of the one above. Remember that the next time you face an impossible situation. When you are tempted or tired or in trouble. The burden may seem heavy to you from below, but put into proper perspective it is nothing for the one who is holding it above.